

Suicide & the Economy: Research & the Media

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Suicide & the Economy

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Suicide & the Economy

- “Economic crises are strongly associated with increased suicide rates”
 - Everyone *knows* this to be true
 - Image of Depression-era stockbrokers falling past windows
 - Recent media coverage highlights financial problems
 - Google search for “suicide finances 2009 2010 United States”
 - 1,430,000 hits
- Do actual suicide trends and research match the media based picture?

Media portrayal of financial suicide

- Media portrays suicides differently than other deaths
 - Karthik Rajaram – CA – killed family & self October 6, 2009
 - Google* – returned 91,100 hits to “Karthik Rajaram”
 - <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1848422,00.html>
 - Mayor Jayne Peters killed adult daughter & herself July 13, 2010
 - <http://www.aolnews.com/crime/article/officials-friends-mystified-by-mayors-murder-suicide/19558041>
 - Google* – returned 481,000 hits to “Mayor Jayne Peters suicide”
 - “Suicide bankruptcy” – returned 1,790,000 Google hits*
 - Including “Suicide or bankruptcy?”
 - “Picture a harassed debtor, pistol cocked at his temple as he contemplates the comparative advantages of bankruptcy and suicide”
 - <http://www.jstor.org/pss/1225966>

* Google results obtained September 6, 2010

Availability Heuristic

- Cognitive psychology concept
 - “People predict the frequency of an event, or a proportion within a population, based on how easily an example can be brought to mind” (Wikipedia)
 - The more you’re exposed to an idea or problem, the bigger it becomes in your mind
 - The easier you can think of it, the more prevalent you think it is
- Media = Magnifying Lens
 - Takes a real phenomenon and magnifies its perceived prevalence
 - Until “everybody knows”
- Problem is – we forget our knowledge is ‘magnified’
 - Fit the magnified perception into our general knowledge context
 - Then forget that that knowledge was specially enhanced
 - Counterexample - “Objects in mirror are closer than they appear”

Availability Heuristic, cont.

- Example: High school kids & alcohol & drug use
 - HS kids ~ 80% perceive that their peers use drugs and alcohol
 - HS kids ~ 30% report use themselves
 - But — ‘everybody knows’ that most HS kids party regularly
- Social Marketing drug & alcohol prevention counters what everyone knows by publicizing actual use rates to counter what ‘everybody knows’

Media effects on financial-based suicides

- Implications of the magnification effect of media portrayal on suicide
 - Frequent media portrayal of suicide magnifies perception of actual suicide rate
 - Media begins to seek out any and all financial connections when reporting on suicide
 - Magnifies the connection between financial stress and suicide even further
 - Until the connection seems so prevalent we forget about the magnification
- Reporting bias on financial-based suicide leads to media focus, which increases media coverage, which increases media focus, which...
 - Bachko, K. Suicide Watch: Covering death during a financial crisis. Columbia Journalism Review, October 2008
- Result: 'Everybody knows' that suicides increase dramatically during financial crises

Availability Heuristic, cont.

- Side effects of media based magnification of financial-based suicide rate
 - Normalizes suicide as a solution to hard problems
 - Promotes use of suicide as a solution to financial problems
 - Copy cat & contagion suicides
 - Studies show significant increases in suicides following media publication
 - Martin, G. Media influence to suicide: The search for solutions. Archives of Suicide Research, 1998, Volume 4, Number 1, 51-6
 - Hassan, R. Effects of newspaper stories on the incidence of suicide in Australia: a research note. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, 1995, Vol. 29, No. 3, Pages 480-483

Research on suicide & economic crises

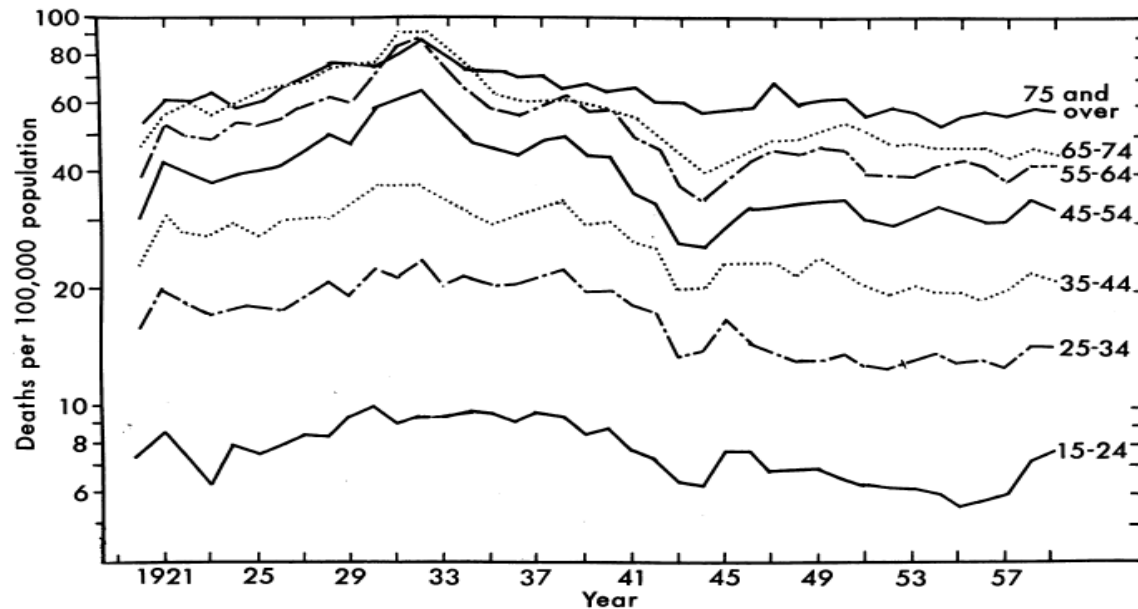
- Research presents a considerably different picture
 - Not as sensational or fun to read - 'Just the facts'
 - Researchers use unemployment as measure of economic crisis
 - Easily definable, stable estimate of economic conditions
- General findings
 - In US and other countries (e.g., Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Great Britain, Japan)
 - For the Great Depression, other financial crises from 1920 - 2000
 - There is a *slight* increase in suicide coupled with unemployment numbers
 - Sometimes statistically significant, sometimes not
 - Only for working age men & above (35-40 years plus)
 - Female suicide rates stable during economic crises

Research on the Great Depression

- Frequently used by media as evidence of increased suicides during economic crises
 - Stockbrokers jumping from legends in droves
 - One source – 14 actual stockbroker suicides (reference?)
 - Has attained Urban Legend status
 - Very hard to pry an urban legend away from a believer
- Research
 - Increase in suicides during Depression years was part of larger rising trend
 - Change in the US suicide during GD from 14/100,000 to 17/100,000
 - Increase for males only. Females showed a faint pattern of increase.
 - Affects older men differently than young men
 - Research conclusion:
 - “If the suicide rate was high among financiers in 1929, it was not high enough, or the group at risk was not large enough, to be reflected in national rates.”

Research & The Great Depression

Figure 6. Annual age-specific death rates from suicide, white males, U.S. Death Registration States of 1920, 1920-32, and United States, 1933-59



Vol. 78, No. 4, April 1963

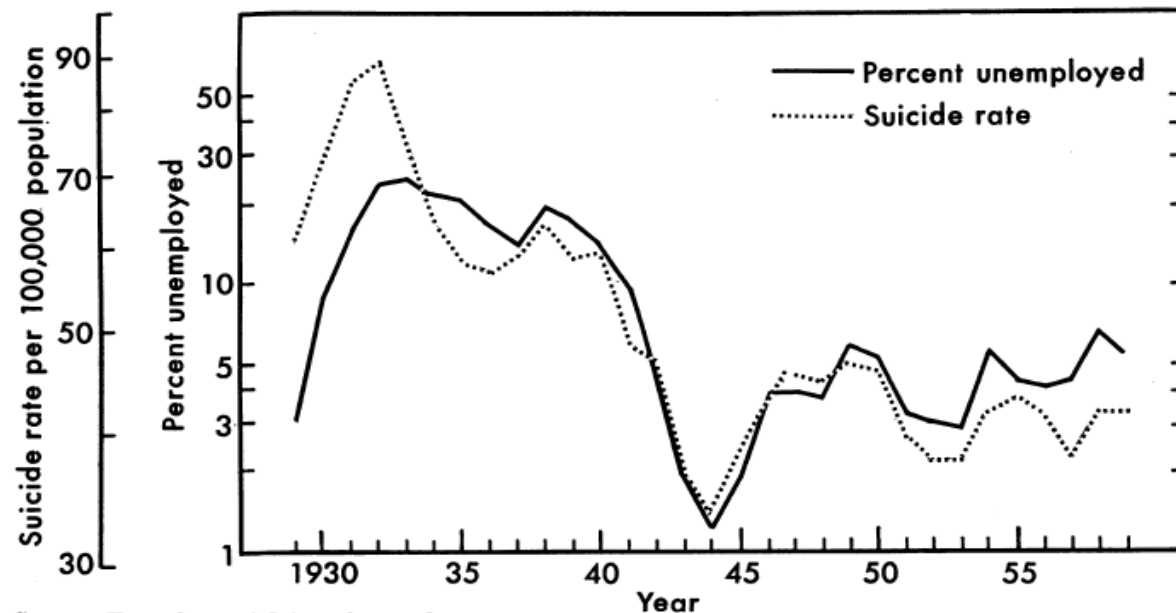
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Figure shows increase in suicides over Great Depressions for white males. Note prominent effect for men 45 and older b/w 1929 -1935.

MacMahon, B, Johnson, S, Pugh, TF. Relation of Suicide Rates to Social Conditions, Relation of Suicide Rates to Social Conditions. Public Health Rep. 1963 April; 78(4): 285-293

Research & The Great Depression

Figure 9. Secular trend in suicide rates for white males aged 45–54 and percent of the labor force unemployed, United States, 1929–59



SOURCE: Unemployment data, reference 8.

Figure shows suicide rate vs unemployment rate during Great Depression. Note increase after stock collapse in 1929. Also note how closely suicide rate follows unemployment rate for most years.

MacMahon, B, Johnson, S, Pugh, TF. Relation of Suicide Rates to Social Conditions, Relation of Suicide Rates to Social Conditions. Public Health Rep. 1963 April; 78(4): 285–293

Research portrayal of suicide & economic crises

- Similar results for other economic crashes, other countries
 - There is a relationship between unemployment & suicide
 - But the relationship is complex and far from clear or direct
 - Part of the problem is the relatively small number of suicides compared to the social stats of an entire population
 - The effect gets washed out by variation caused by other factors
 - Like trying to understand the motion of one leaf in a fast flowing river
- The impact of economic change on suicide largely affects working age men (traditional wage earners?)
- Exaggerated media portrayal of increases suicide due to finances makes the problem worse

Economic-based suicide part of a larger health crisis

- Some researchers propose that unemployment has an impact on many aspects of general health
- A number of negative health issues increase with unemployment
 - Physical –heart disease, lung cancer, high blood pressure, diabetes, maternal & infant mortality, susceptibility to colds & flu
 - Mental – **self-esteem, stress, hopelessness, anxiety, depression**
 - Behavioral – **substance use**, accidents, domestic violence & **suicide**
- Smith R. Unemployment and health: a disaster and a challenge. Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Linn, M, Sandifer, R & Stein, S. Effects of unemployment on mental and physical health. Am J Public Health. 1985 May; 75(5): 502–506.
- Murphy, GC & Athanasou, JA. The effect of unemployment on mental health. Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, Volume 72, Number 1, March 1999 , pp. 83-99(17).

Hypothesized mechanism underlying economic suicide

- High unemployment rates (economic crises) have a negative impact on a complex set of health & behavior issues
- Several of those are known risk factors for suicide:
 - Loss of self-esteem
 - Stress
 - Hopelessness
 - Anxiety
 - Depression
 - Substance use
 - Suicide
- Add in loss of income, home, reputation, masculine/provider identity, respect of family, friends & colleagues, etc.
- Such combinations of suicide risk factors could predispose a normally non-suicidal person to suicide and vulnerable to a trigger
 - “If one more thing goes wrong...”

Implications for suicide prevention

- During economic crises:
 - Pay attention to family & community members with multiple and/or sudden changes in risk factors for suicide, especially employment or financial-related issues
 - Prevention can range from listening to community organizing to economic intervention (financial, job offers, etc) to active suicide intervention (means restriction, monitoring, etc.)
 - Work with businesses & industries laying off, firing personnel or closing to include suicide prevention & screening
 - Work with community & government agencies to increase outreach to employees & families of troubled businesses & industries
 - Work locally and nationally to improve media reports of suicide

Media guidelines for reporting suicides

- <http://www.suicide.org/media-guidelines-for-suicide.html>

- News media should:
 - ALWAYS provide suicide prevention information with suicide stories
 - Include 24-hour suicide hotline numbers
 - Emphasize the number one cause for suicide is untreated depression
 - Indicate that depression is treatable and help available
 - Suicide must be discussed to foster prevention, but stories should end on hope, help and the impact on survivors
- News media should NOT:
 - Begin newscast with a suicide story
 - Place suicide stories on the front page
 - Sensationalize or romanticize suicide
 - Portray suicide as heroic
 - Provide explicit details (e.g., method)
 - Simplify suicide as reaction to one event such as loss of income, financial crises, etc.
 - Use phrases like ‘successful suicide’
 - Imply there is a suicide epidemic

News articles about suicide should ALWAYS conclude with:

Suicide is never the answer. Getting help is the answer.